WHY HEALTHY ECE MATTERS
A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO IMPROVING HEALTHY EATING, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SCREEN TIME IN EARLY CHILD CARE SETTINGS
Background

With the overarching goal of increasing the number of early care and education (ECE) settings in Pennsylvania that support healthy weight for all children, The Food Trust led a participatory campaign to engage parents, caregivers, ECE providers and decision-makers in discussions about healthy ECE settings, focusing on physical activity, healthy eating and screen time.

This campaign aimed to lift up the voices of those most impacted, and provide advocacy tools, resources and opportunities to parents, caregivers and ECE providers. The Food Trust partnered with two organizations to convene and educate our community health advocates — the local affiliate of the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) and First Up. These partners have long-standing relationships with parents and ECE providers.

Pennsylvania's ECE Health Standards

Pennsylvania does not have mandatory physical activity, healthy eating and screen time standards for ECE centers. There are two instances of voluntary standards: The Keystone STARS Program Performance Standards, used to evaluate all licensed facilities in the state, offers optional bonus points for programs that are a Star 3 or 4 for participating in an organized effort to promote nutritional health for children. Philadelphia’s Board of Health also offers voluntary standards for ECE’s nutrition and screen time practices, released in 2017.

Some state and regional infrastructure is in place to support healthy ECEs. Pennsylvania’s Keystone Kids Go, an initiative focused on improving young children’s nutrition and physical activity, targets practitioners from childcare, Head Start, early intervention, family literacy, and pre-kindergarten programs. In 2018, the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) supported the first revision of the Keystone STARS since creation in 2002. OCDEL is evaluating the Performance Standards while
supporting the quality coaches, who have the responsibility to support and engage teachers and ECEs in implementation. In 2018, OCDEL also launched regional Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRCs), consolidating two existing regional support offices to “enhance resource and referral system for communities seeking early learning services and supports.”

Campaign Activities

When it comes to implementing and improving child care policies, the voices of parents and early child care providers are critical.

For this campaign, NBCDI coordinated a series of advocacy trainings, “Parent Cafes,” for caregivers to learn about the importance of physical activity, healthy eating and screen time as well as health-related topics for growing children, storytelling and advocacy strategies. First Up led advocacy training for providers, during which they presented tools and resources about engaging in the legislative process. To encourage participation, trainings were held on Saturday mornings throughout the Philadelphia region, and partners distributed stipends to participants.

With local partners, The Food Trust convened three listening sessions in Allegheny County, Philadelphia County and Mifflin/Juniata Counties. Listening session participants discussed what physical activity, healthy eating and screen time meant to them, what would help them achieve healthy ECE focus areas in their communities and their respective landscape of ECE programs. After reviewing standards from other communities, participants discussed implementation of similar standards, the barriers to having such standards in Pennsylvania, which parts were favorable and any additional feedback. The sessions spanned 60 to 90 minutes with dinner and childcare provided. Participants included parents/caregivers, providers, local and state politicians and state agency representatives.

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1 Press Release “Wolf Administration Announces Selection for New Regional Centers to Support Child Care Services”
Findings

1. **Stakeholders have a high commitment to and interest in healthy practices in ECE settings.** Practitioners and advocates alike are passionate about children’s health and well-being, and believe in the significance of the ECE space on the health of young children and their families. Providers and parents recognize that they also serve as role models and need to follow healthy practices themselves.

2. **Public funding for ECE setting and related public infrastructure is limited.** The sector struggles to develop and retain high-quality staff, to implement programs and to improve practices. Many centers have inadequate facilities to support healthy practices and some ECEs rely on public infrastructure. Communities which are most impacted may also have limited public infrastructure, such as safe and clean playgrounds or recreation centers.

3. **Providers and parents desire information, resources and best practices around healthy practices.** While there are many sources for information, there is also misinformation and no central clearinghouse. ELRCs were identified as a way to distribute information to providers and parents about programs and healthy practices in and out of early learning centers. Generally, information should be designed for implementation with an awareness of local context.

4. **Coaching, combined with financial incentives, could encourage providers to implement and expand healthy practices.** Initiatives, such as the 2019 mini grant program for providers to utilize PA NAPSACC², can support actions and conversations that result in ongoing, long-term efforts. Participants identified that the ELRC quality coaches could play a role in supporting ECEs in the implementation of healthy practices.

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² An evidence-based program for improving the health of young children by enhancing child care programs’ practices, policies, and environments
5. **Receptivity about mandatory standards varied across region, type of provider and issue area.** Local factors, such as type of ECE provider (e.g. family day care, preschool, etc.), kitchen and refrigeration facilities, Child and Adult Care Food Program enrollment, public infrastructure, and local food system, factor into ECE centers’ consideration of mandatory standards. Support for two mandatory standards exists: not permitting screen time for children under the age of 2, and mandating healthy beverages in ECEs. Providers highlighted challenges for achieving physical activity standards when indoors and in settings with limited outdoor infrastructure and space. Providers highlighted challenges for meeting healthy eating standards when parents pack meals/snacks. Providers also noted the need for educational resources to support implementation of healthy screen time and beverages standards.

**Recommendations**

1. **Provide resources and education to help ECE centers achieve healthy goals.**
   a. **Physical Activity:** Fund public infrastructure and center equipment to enable physical activity. Fund training of staff on the importance of physical activity.
   b. **Screen Time:** Establish mandatory requirements that limit screen time for children under the age of 2. Guidance should encourage the use of screens as an interactive tool for education and communication.
   c. **Healthy Eating:** Establish healthy beverage requirements, such as limiting beverages to water and milk. Give providers information about water access and safety to support water as the primary beverage on site. Continued education on CACFP guidelines, as well as identification of solutions to barriers of labor cost, food access and affordability of local food, will progress healthy eating practices.

2. **Integrate PA NAPSACC into Keystone Stars for all STAR levels.** Keystone STARS’ bonus point for participation in an organized effort to promote nutritional health for children can be strengthened by referring specifically to PA NAPSACC and by applying to all STAR levels. PA NAPSACC is an evidence-based and cost-effective
program that enhances child care program practices, policies and environments related to physical activity, healthy eating and screen time.³

3. **Utilize Early Learning Resource Centers (ELRCs) to support centers, caregivers and families** ELRCs provide a single point of contact for families and providers. With a more active role in disseminating information to providers and ECE directors about physical activity, healthy eating and screen time, ELRCs can support best practice implementation. Support to ECE staff implementing new standards is important for early success and sustainability.

4. **Address Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the Early Child Care Spaces.** There is a need for greater understanding of the differences that occur due to variations in provider type (head start, faith-based, center or home) and region (urban, rural or suburban). With a more intentional approach to addressing the barriers that ECEs face, there will be more success in supporting healthy physical activity, eating and screen time practices. Applying a racial equity framework to planning, decision-making, and resource allocation with a racial equity lens or a targeted universalism approach could offer a population-based approach that achieves a universal goal (healthy ECEs) with a targeted approach to communities and centers that have been excluded from receiving the resources and opportunities that account for disparities and historical context.

³ Go NAP SAC http://www.panapsacc.org/
About the partners

**The Food Trust** works to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food and information to make healthy decisions. The Food Trust’s comprehensive approach includes improving food environments and teaching nutrition education in schools; working with corner store owners to increase healthy offerings and helping customers make healthier choices; managing farmers markets in communities that lack access to affordable produce; and encouraging grocery store development in underserved communities.

**NBCDI** strives to improve and protect the quality of life of African American children and families and this is carried through a national affiliate network, public education projects and by providing leadership training in the areas of early care and education, early education, child welfare, parenting and health.

**First Up** improves Early Childhood Education quality and access in Southeastern Pennsylvania by providing technical assistance and training for early childhood professionals.

For more information:
- [Ready Set Grow](#)
- [Keystone Kids Go](#)
- [Voices for Healthy Kids](#)